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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses briefly the responsibilities which site-based decision-making (S-B D-M) imply and presents the many opportunities to innovate collaboratively as a way to achieve greater professionalism. Texas' Senate Bill 1 (199) and House Bill 2885 (1991) set into motion two important aspects of educational reform, the decentralization of the Texas Education Agency's supervisory/compliance power to permit greater flexibility to response at the local level, and the authorization for local education agencies to conduct site-based management. As with any educational innovation, S-B D-M requires training effort, and time to implement well. Some schools who rushed into S-B D-M assumed that they could do whatever they wanted, while other schools merely allowed the principal to dominate the work of classroom teachers. The essence of S-B D-M is school-level autonomy plus participating decision-making. Minimally the site plan must include: collaborative goal setting; curriculum; staffing; budget development; program implementation; and evaluation. S-B D-M is not a panacea, but it is an attempt to reform and improve education for creating empowered and collaborative groups of reflective practitioners in the schools. (Author/RJM)

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Site-based Decision-Making:

Achieving a New Level of Professionalism

by

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Keynote address to the Edgewood Independent School District's Second Annual C&I Conference, San Antonio, TX. April 5, 1996.

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Abstract

Texas' Senate Bill 1 (1990) and House Bill 2885 (1991) set into motion two important aspects of educational reform, the decentralization of the Texas Education Agency's supervisory/compliance power to permit greater flexibility of response at the local level, and the authorization for local education agencies to conduct site-based management. As with any educational innovation, site-based decision-making (S-B D-M) requires training effort, and time to implement well. Some schools who rushed into S-B D-M assumed that they could do whatever they wanted, while other schools merely crowned the principal. This paper adumbrates the responsibilities which S-B D-M implies and presents the many opportunities to innovate collaboratively as a way to achieve greater professionalism.

10-5-96
Edgewood ISD's (San Antonio)
Second Annual C&I Conference
Keynote Address

Site-Based Decision-Making:
Achieving a New Level of Professionalism

by

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A great pleasure to be here to commence the theme of this staff development day, "Together Everyone Achieves More," by talking to you about site-based decision-making as a way to achieve a new level of professionalism among educators and a closer involvement of our school's constituent communities with education.

In 1990, Texas' Senate Bill 1 and in 1991 House Bill 2885 opened the door to this collaborative process, S-B D-M. Together these pieces of legislation provided for two very important changes in the ways schools carry out their business. On the one hand, there was a move to remove the compliance role of the Texas Education Agency; on the other, there was a move to decentralize control of the school district's central office so that local school would enjoy greater autonomy. Since then there has been, on the whole, some confusion, since the roles of principals and teachers have been considerably altered.

I hope that my presentation today helps to remove some of this confusion and to inspire you to work in a new and exciting, collaborative professional role, a role that can raise expectations for yourself and the students in your care.

Here are some common misconceptions about S-B D-M:

1. The principal now acts like yesteryear's assistant superintendent

for instruction, dominating the work of classroom teachers, telling them what to implement and how to do it. [Unfortunately, too many teachers are comfortable with this type of subordination, since it protects them from the responsibility of taking charge of instruction, and too many principals feel too vulnerable to TAAS accountability to empower their teachers to take the academic reins.]

2. The site-committee can decide pretty much whatever it wants to do with instruction, so long as it is accountable for results. [It is important to keep the distinction between freedom and recklessness in mind.] Consider this watchword: By the time the TAAS results are back, you might have wasted a year's efforts.

The current spirit of educational reform has wrought S-B D-M, but we need to remind ourselves--our perhaps to find out for the first time--what this entails. As Jane David put it, "the essence of [S-B D-M] is school-level autonomy plus participating decision-making." She should have included "professionally guided" or "professionally based" as well, since no educator worthy of the name acts capriciously or even subjectively when weighing a course of action.

Here is the minimum that you must do; what your site plan must include:

1. Collaborative goal setting, preferably based in part on a needs analysis and data. Local preferences take a second place to needs.

2. Curriculum. S-B D-M is nothing if not to support instruction. Instruction must grow out of the knowledge base of the profession, and must not be subject to political influence, economic bribery,

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or the agendas of special interest groups. Curricular features need to be specified so that at least minimal implementation can be checked.

3. Staffing. Goals and curriculum imply staffing. N.B.: A staff's composition may not need to be permanent. For example, one may need certain specialists or an extra counselor during certain stages of implementation, but not for others.

4. Budget development. Goals + curriculum + staffing imply budget. Budgets, ideally, should not be uniformly allocated to campuses according to a fixed rule, e.g., by head count, but according to the central administration's judgment of the local school's need and the feasibility of its site committee's plan. Always keep an amount in reserve to help high need schools with highly responsive, highly feasible plans. Schools with high needs and poor plans need to be reorganized.

   On a different note, one of the acid tests for S-B D-M is whether a school committee has real budget authority. If a school committee cannot decide how to spend its money to support its plan, the school is not site-based. If the school committee cannot direct that money be spent to support its plan, it is not empowered, it is not collaborative.

5. Program implementation. This is the heart of the S-B rationale. Once decisions have been made about what to do and how to do it, everyone must do her/his best to "get on with the program." The principal or a designated assistant along with the "executive

committee" of the site-committee must ensure implementation, even if fairly extreme measures need to be taken, for without at least minimal levels of implementation, adaptive changes or modifications in the program cannot be made, since you will not know just what it is that you have in place. The extent of program implementation is called implementation success.

Warning: Do not try anything that is too ambitious without first doing lots of training, parental preparation, and determining that the plan has a high likelihood of success based upon pilot efforts at your site.

Should implementation of any of the essential or many of the the supporting parts of the program fall short of the minimal levels specified in the curriculum, the principal and the site committee need to have the flexibility to call an emergency meeting of the site's faculty and staff to adapt the plan, rekindle enthusiasm, and ask for help even if it means adding a few days to the school calendar or canceling scheduled workdays later in the year!

If necessary, return some of the money to central office and concentrate on training or retraining.

6. Evaluation. The site committee needs to designate qualified personnel to handle the formative or ongoing evaluation as well as the summative or sunset or final evaluation for each major component of the site's plan. Formative evaluations allow for mid-course corrections, as it were, whereas summative

evaluations determine whether a program or any of its major components should continue, undergo basic revisions, or be discontinued. One way to get a team leader for this important function is to hire an administrator, support person, or teacher who is skilled in evaluation or at least in its rudiments and who can double in brass, as it were.

But this work--evaluation--cannot be left to second place. Evaluation has objective and intuitive elements, and a considerable portion of the lead evaluator's job has to be clearly devoted to these tasks. It cannot be "extra" or "beyond" the person's regular duties.

Evaluation should dedicate itself to

a. student outcomes and expectations for their success
b. implementation success
c. school climate
d. anticipated outcomes/goals-objectives
e. unanticipated outcomes, positive and negative
f. narrative descriptions to supplement numerical data
g. the search for and exposure of tacit beliefs and practices that facilitate or inhibit student's success
h. disaggregation of student data to study impacts on subpopulations of students.

This kind of evaluation can tie tacit practices, school climate, and implementation success to student outcomes, and can

therefore serve to guide the next round of decisions about program adjustments and modifications.

Sometimes current educational practices seem incompatible with previous ones that were demonstrated to be successful. The notion of the "least restrictive environment" for handicapped students, for example, flew in the face of separate schools for the disabled, but now seems to have proven itself once it underwent certain changes, such as adequate "staffings" to support the IEP. Now, however, the notion of de-tracking students--the practice of "inclusionism"--is gaining ground, although it has not yet been demonstrated effective with special populations and clearly runs the well documented risk that many teachers will either "teach to the middle group" or find ways to group students within class or share students with other teachers in ways that will keep this innovation from being implemented even to a minimal level.

Similarly, some site-based reforms run historically documented risks of over looking or slighting certain subpopulations in favor of general results. We know, for example, that historically certain subpopulations have not been equitably treated by the schools whenever an accrediting agency, like the State Department of Education--the TEA in our case--has not closely monitored compliance with very specific procedures to ensure the adequacy of the educational interventions for these subgroups. Migrant students, handicapped students, low-status immigrant children, and English-language learners have all suffered whenever schools have felt that they could be "flexible" with them.

Some of the current abuses that I have personally noticed during my frequent visits to the schools include the following tacit practices:

a. long-term assignment of immigrant students to

so-called Newcomer Centers.

b. exiting students from a bilingual program to the regular program but one or even two grade levels behind (or below) the level they had reached at the time they exited.

c. reestablishment of retention practices in the early grades, even at Kindergarten.

d. hiring only those teachers who agree to teach reading through only one method, the one espoused by the teachers in that school.

e. categorizing a classroom as "bilingual" merely because it has ELL children.

None of these practices has any credible support in the knowledge base of teaching, all of these practices are actually, demonstrably counterproductive, and some of them will only confuse the results of any evaluative study, will actually keep reform from happening, since unknown or even deliberately masked influences will be at work to defeat the process of innovation.

Finally, S-B practices run the risk of isolating role-alike teachers, so that they fail to work with peers on other campuses. Hence the importance of conferences like this and the necessity of maintaining your professional memberships.

Conclusion

S-B is not a panacea, but it is an attempt to reform and improve education by creating empowered and collaborative groups of reflective practitioners in each of the schools. Whether S-B will work depends on the level of personal and professional response that you are willing to make.

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